

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES NO. 22

PAINTINGS BY
Marjorie Phillips



No. 5

INTERIOR WITH PHILODENDRON

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THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, D. C.

MARJORIE PHILLIPS

THIS IS AN EXHIBITION of realistic paintings inspired by nature, firm in structure, luminous and lyrical in color. Such painting has an impressive tradition. Precursors of closely observed, well built, luminous and lyrical realism were the Velasquez of the broadly sketched glimpses of the Villa Medici's garden, the Vermeer of the resonant, vibrant, *View of Delft*, the Corot of the sunny, early landscapes of Italy. To be worthy of such ancestry a contemporary realist must preserve individuality and avoid eclecticism. Marjorie Phillips is not eclectic and not derivative. Her style has an unself-conscious originality without need of stylization or mannerism. It is strikingly different from the realistic landscapes and still lifes we see in the current exhibitions—the photographic ones, dry and colorless or shiny and metallic, or the fool-the-eye magic made to look so like the actual objects that we are tempted to touch. Perhaps just because the luminous landscapes, fruits and flowers in broken colors by Monet, Renoir and Cézanne left so little room for improvement our contemporary realists, under some inferiority complex, or under the compulsion of having to be different, have reacted as usual against their predecessors. With a few very distinguished exceptions our realists of today have forsaken painterly brush strokes and nature's own color and light for sharp focus records spiced with incongruous details or topical commentary. Until recently light and deep space have been the least appreciated elements in modern painting. But there is a very recent development. Luminosity in color may once again be prized since the popular abstract expressionists are using "color as light" and floating it over their huge canvases in shapes more and more suggestive of nature's clouds and ferns and flower-petals. Marjorie Phillips has, as we say, kept the faith and carried the torch for atmospheric colors yet only when they reveal

the essential character of objects and do not conceal the underlying form and structure.

In the kaleidoscope of ever changing styles, coexisting and contradicting each other, which we call modern painting, the first of the real revolutions which changed the direction in which artists were moving was when Claude Monet escaped from the museums into the open air for his research into optical appearance. That was the "avant-garde" of the 1880s when Monet and Pissarro dissolved forms in prismatic atmosphere to demonstrate their discovery that light is composed of the colors of the spectrum. Then it was that Cézanne used that new science and that new freedom and freshness to make with simplified functionalism his great contribution "color as form", lifting the art of painting to unprecedented technical purity and completeness. This was of course a reinforcement of tradition and yet it had revolutionary consequences. Cézanne's modulated color planes suggested yet another escape from the past which could also be, if one wished, an escape from the present and its disturbing realities. I refer of course to that predominant factor and prevailing fashion in modern art—abstraction. The geometrical cubes soon gave way to planes in two dimensions, austere symbols for space as a limit. Now the latest of many reactions against that architectonic discipline is the Abstract Expressionists' (more particularly Mark Rothko's) conception of bigger and bigger "walls of light" at the expense of the picture plane. Space is now something to explore and into which to expand, and color is more broken and vibrant again. So the cycle of revolutions and reactions has turned full circle back to Monet and his lily ponds reflecting the sky. We may be on the way back to painterly realism. Yet it could be that now it is just another way of escape, like the luminism of Monet, from the fundamentals of structure and order. Surely space as such is not enough for painting, just as enclosures were not enough, nor any other imposed restriction of the artist's freedom to see, to interpret and

to celebrate the world we inhabit, the good earth and its fruits and flowers.

It has been a time of proliferating confusions in the studios but also of fascinating aesthetic experiments and achievements. Art has been far sought, and ingeniously inventive—seeking new ideas from the exotic ends of the earth and from the most improbable sources of inspiration such as expendable scraps. Corot made his own intimate visual experiences at home or abroad our eternal treasures. Would he be lost and bewildered in this third quarter of the 20th century? No, for then as now there were many conflicting issues in art yet he remained serene in his observations, his simplifications and his refinements. Marjorie Phillips is an artist of that same reassuring integrity. She is one for whom the visible world exists. She sings its praise.

In the Phillips Collection as Associate Director she has responded with me to all that is good in this thrilling period of artistic adventures, with keen appreciation of the additions to the painter's potentialities and resources. She is quick to see the special distinction in a new medium, a new technic or a new point of view. One of her many rare qualities as an artist and as an appreciator is that she keeps her creative and her critical faculties separate and independent and yet cooperative. With an open mind she welcomes the symbols and the metaphors and all the diversities which affirm our freedom from collectivism. Yet she cannot fail to note the spread of conformity in our free world to this insistent fashion for one or another kind of abstraction. However much she prefers such ardours to the stale and warmed-over realism of the Academies she is undistracted in her faith in realism as it has been in its great days, as it can be again when the artists regain their self-reliance and cultivate and trust their own sensibilities. She is not embattled against the distractions of the galleries, including our own, because her sincerity is in no danger. She takes and assimilates what will contribute to her growth as an artist.

And Marjorie Phillips has grown from the subtle delicately luminous impressionism of her first period to a stronger, more sparkling clarity, to an occasional, quaintly original caprice (as in the *Big Pear* and the *Dark Red Apple and Books*), to more complex organizations of solids in shallow space, to more rhythmical patterning with echoings of color and line, to an ever more knowing mastery of the values of near and far, to an ever richer interplay of darks and lights, and finally to an unobtrusively balanced tension between nature and art. All this awareness of the function of color and form makes her unmistakably of her period. If she has more care for the quality of her pigment and the truth of her drawing than is the way of the moderns that is her character as a painter and as a person. The range of her realism in this exhibition is remarkable, extending from the dramatic landscape entitled *Counterpoint* and the exciting *Night Baseball* to the large subtle *Interior with Philodendron* in mingled lamplight and daylight, its leaves a cascade of subtle, differentiated greens. I am especially fond of the crystalline classic finality of the landscapes entitled *Farm Road* and *Willmore Road*—and among all these flowers I might select as my favorite the glowing little bunch of *Nasturtiums* on a golden brown table against a violet-blue wall.

All these paintings are familiar records of our shared experience in translating the joys of seeing pictorially into the even greater joys of painting. I have watched with pride my wife's unswerving fidelity to her first impressions, the first image of her mind's eye, the moment of vision. After the long sessions of slowly revised and improved relationships on the larger projects (for her's is an art of second thought) the mat textures will still look unlabored and spontaneous. Their freshness, clarity and charm remain. Whenever there are inspired touches of the brush, when the hand and the eye were one, such artistry makes a kind of solace for those of us who love good painting for its own sake and who miss it when it is hard to find.

DUNCAN PHILLIPS

Catalogue of the Exhibition

1. THE DARK RED APPLE AND BOOKS

2. SCABIOSA

3. COMING AUTUMN

4. DELPHINIUM GARDEN

5. INTERIOR WITH PHILODENDRON

6. ORCHID AND PALETTE

Lent by The Phillips Gallery

7. THE PINK CUP

8. INTERIOR WITH BABETTE

9. BASKET OF FLOWERS

10. FLOWERS IN LUSTRE PITCHER

11. CONVERSATION PIECE

12. LILACS

13. OCTAGONAL TABLE

14. LITTLE APPLE ORCHARD

15. VASE OF FLOWERS

Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Wm. R. B. Acker

16. GRASS PATH IN SPRING

Lent by Mrs. G. Lister Carlisle

17. LANDSCAPE WITH RED BARN

Lent by Mrs. G. Lister Carlisle

18. TULIPS

19. THE BIG PEAR
20. BARN AND BUCKWHEAT
21. WILLMORE ROAD
Lent by James Laughlin IV
22. COUNTERPOINT
Lent by The Phillips Gallery
23. NASTURTIUMS
Lent by Duncan Phillips
24. NIGHT BASEBALL
Lent by The Phillips Gallery
25. SUN AFTER RAIN
Lent by The Phillips Gallery
26. STILL LIFE WITH PANSIES
Lent by Laughlin Phillips
27. FARM ROAD
Lent by The Phillips Gallery
28. THE OLD BEECH TREE
Lent by The Phillips Gallery
29. ZINNIAS
Lent by The Phillips Gallery
30. VIOLETS AND GARDENIA
Lent by The Phillips Gallery
31. AUTUMN AFTERNOON
*Lent by The Whitney Museum of
American Art*
32. THE BUZZARD
*Lent by The Yale University Art
Gallery (Katherine Dreier Bequest)*
33. PANSIES AND ROSES

